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ABSTRACT

Many readers will agree that the conditions in our schools need improvement, that problems in schools are closely linked with the problems in our society, and that local control has diminished. The yielding of local control has contributed substantially to these problems. Uniform standards and minimum performance criteria have been tried and the results are dismal. It is a difficult thing, probably, for government people to accept the idea that the most responsible thing to do is to exercise less direct responsibility, to be greatly concerned and supportive without specifying the improvements to be made. But education today needs just that, the opportunity and the responsibility for local schools, for teachers in the classroom, for citizens in a neighborhood, to run their own schools. (Author/MLF)

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QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND THE DIMINUTION OF LOCAL CONTROL IN SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

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QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND THE DIMINUTION OF LOCAL CONTROL IN SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

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In response to a request from the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education of the U.S. House of Representatives, October, 1979.

In the last thirty years common education in the United States has become increasingly controlled by forces external to the local school--and even within it, by a corporate concept of schooling. Centrist tendencies are common throughout the society, part of the "shrinking world," but the schools have been specially pressured. The subtle political and managerial message to the schools has been, "You are incompetent, you need to be directed." Yet the only effective public educational system we have had and know how to have is one that protects teaching from outside control. Federal, state and district leaders have shown little talent for protecting classroom teaching from corporate demands.

During the early 1950s, with rising expectation for the nation's schools, there was an extended debate about increased federal participation. Would it increase the quality of public education? Those supporting the National Defense Education Bill argued that the national well-being required improvement in schooling, that national funding and national direction were needed. Opponents argued that federal legislation would diminish the control exercised by local communities--a factor seen by them essential to the maintenanc of high quality instruction.

Such legislation passed--at both state and federal levels--with assurances that allocated moneys would be used only to support local communities in the pursuit of their own educational goals, such as to help them build buildings, develop new curricula, and provide special facilities for handicapped youngsters. With the shock of Sputnik, with the promise of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, and with anger over the inequities of the property tax, with these and many political and economic changes came a willingness even to have federal and state governments assume a substantial portion of the costs of ordinary schooling. The promise remained that decisions about teaching and learning would continue to reside with local authorities.

In most schools, local control meant that a teacher was free to teach as he or she thought best. There were bounds, of course, bounds set by hiring practice more than by directives or syllabi. Then as now, teachers were selected to please the administrators and the parents. Teachers felt little pressure to cover the same lessons in classrooms across the community. Often there was uniformity, but little pressure for uniformity. The ethic was one of taking youngsters "as they were," pacing the lessons and grading the papers so as to maintain a good learning environment for those in that room. Teachers were in charge.

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*The research and program evaluation findings upon which this statement is based are presented best in Case Studies in Science Education, a national study funded by the National Science Foundation and distributed by the US Government Printing Office. Participation as an evaluation specialist in the evaluation of such programs as Experimental Schools, Follow-Through, Project City Science, 4-H, and Cities in Schools have contributed as well to the formulation of the position the author takes.

According to public opinion poll and casual testimony, there was a confidence in our schools. It was obvious that improvements were needed, especially for example in science where the technical advances traceable to World War II were not yet manifest in lessons and laboratories. By 1960 according to the majority opinion, the time had come for central responsibility in education, particularly in research and development of curricular materials, audio-visual aids, and student counseling. Few people in or outside the profession felt that technical and subject matter advances might be accompanied by challenges to the authority and self-confidence of the teacher. But those challenges came quickly.

The schools failed to do the rather different things that Admiral Rickover, President Johnson, and Johnny's parents wanted them to do. It was not that they did so badly what they had always done, they just were expected to do so much more. Many promises were made, and many broken. Each unfulfilled expectation brought about a new renovation, a new quest for the technology that would remedy our schools. And each new idea placed less reliance on the competence of the neighborhood and school staff to solve their problems. Much local control was yielded willingly, even advocated, as political leaders saw the schools as an instrument for social reform and as the citizenry became increasingly aware of shortcomings of the schools.

Toward a Corporate Perspective

As with many institutions in our society, the public schools have become increasingly oriented to state and federal standards, less oriented to the standards of family and neighborhood. Although state and federal standards are not indifferent to the concerns of family and neighborhood, they are not pluralistic, but rather emphasize uniformity and interchangeability, characteristics which often lend themselves to more effective review and control of the schools. Such standards sometimes make teaching more uniform and efficient but narrow the purposes and the effectiveness of schools in providing educational opportunity.

> One teacher told us: "I felt that the function of the (district) staff to me was one of 'big brother.' Just as a little brother tries to please as well as mimic a big brother, I tried."

Other teachers, perhaps a majority, will testify that they are not pressured. But many corporate pressures are subtle. Many come as enticements rather than threats. The important thing is to note what teachers do with their classroom time under the two conditions, when they (and the schools in general) are with the pressures and without.

The schools today provide a curriculum--as spelled out in mandated statements--essentially the same from one corner of the country to another. By choosing somewhat different textbooks and by allowing teachers to relate personal experience to the lessons, what is taught in the classroom still varies from place to place. (Obviously there is also variability in the quality of teaching.) Much of the variability in teaching is determined by and reflects thoughtful efforts on the part of teachers to make instruction more relevant and useful to the individual student.

In our CSSE case studies, science teachers worked

hard to preserve courses for the college-bound. General-education science courses were seen as much less important. "Anyone could take them, anyone could pass them."

Unfortunately, corporate pressures to homogenize the curriculum (pressures from local administrators, teachers and parents as well as from state and federal directives) serve to discourage teachers from individualizing lessons and examining complex relationships and nuances of meaning. The quality of intellectual exchange suffers from pressure to have each student master common tasks. Almost every teacher knows that if you want to help young people think creatively, critically and substantively you need to give them experience in that thinking in every grade from kindergarten on. Yet under pressures to have each child master certain common skills, under a questionable philosophy that complex learnings cannot occur until simple competencies have been mastered, the teachers are providing fewer and fewer opportunities to move beyond simple behaviors, on to the complex learnings honored by the term "education."

This is not to say that all teachers should de-emphasize student mastery of skills. It says that the quality of education is diminishing in this country partly because uniform standards of skill and performance are overemphasized and teachers and parents are not left sufficiently free to bear the burden and exercise the opportunity to decide what is best for the individual student.

Uniform standards are emphasized across the country partly because federal-state assumptions of responsibility (and greater presumptions of responsibility at the district level) invite widespread public review and institutional accountability. Our larger social organizations have little talent for being <u>accountable</u> except within a context of "uniformity across subdivisions," so even when uniformity is not in the best interests of school children, the demand for it is strong.

The pressures for homogenization, almost for nationalization, of teaching and learning are brought about partly because the schools are a principal arena for economic and political striving, in the nation as a whole and in separate communities. In our efforts to improve society, we have invited the schools to neglect their <u>curricular</u> responsibilities.

Economic Encumbrances

It is amply recognized that social privilege is not evenly distributed in this country. Most people see unequal distribution as inevitable, if not largely desirable, but spot injustices in the way things are. Government policy has been heavily oriented to rectifying economic injustice through enabling the poor to do better by becoming better educated; that is, in a capitalist meritocracy, to become more "deserving" of a full share in the national wealth.

The foremost effort for redress of opportunity has been made under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, mainly through Projects Head Start and Follow Through. Here the youngest schoolchildren of poor families have been given special learning experiences which might compensate for some

learning-related amenities of the middle class home. Such efforts, perhaps not surprisingly, have not overcome the disadvantagement of most elligible children, even when gains are measured on simple tests most directly related to the instruction, but the efforts have been for the most part a sincere and thoughtful effort to help those youngsters along. It is not apparent that these moneys could have been better spent.

The schools have become dependent on these moneys. Almost all that receive them have no choice but to satisfy (within some level of interpretation) the regulations--set up at federal, state and district levels to focus the funds on goals set by the Congress. Usually these goals are compatible with local neighborhood goals. Most participating teachers are comfortable with the goals and tolerate most of the extra administrative requirements.

But the whole operation establishes that the purposes of education are external purposes, that the responsibility for determining what is best for children is not a parent-teacher responsibility but that of distant authorities. With participation in the federal program comes the obligation to share responsibility more widely, to accept external standards, and to risk greater embarrassment by not living up to outside expectations. More pressure is on the teacher to "play it safe."

Another example of economic encumbrance on the schools is in the matter of employment opportunity. Three instances are worthy of note.

Most of our government agencies are committed to a policy of leaving the provision of employment opportunity to the private sectors of commerce and industry. Private businesses <u>are</u> increasing the numbers of jobs. The number of new jobs has been increasing at over a million a year for a number of years, thanks mostly to the aggressiveness and ingenuity of private businesses. The huge increase of women seeking work has filled most of those jobs, leaving many youth unemployed and leaving all workers seeking ways to make their own jobs more secure. The proportion of jobs for more highly educated people, including teachers, is diminishing, so they look for ways to protect their income.

Youth unemployment figures are high. The picture is even more discouraging when it is realized that most jobs for youth under 25 are nonpromotion, non-career-oriented jobs. Parents of these young people are distressed. Many employers are also distressed, feeling that they provide jobs that many youth will not take seriously. Both groups believe that the schools should do a better job of getting students ready for work. They probably should. But the fact is that the schools have little chance to make a difference in the youth employment situation. Better educated youngsters would not reduce the level of youth unemployment. And the school is but one small factor in establishing the work ethic of our people. The fact is that these unrealistic expectations put pressure on schools to emphasize preparation for work not highly compatible with the needs of youngsters for a general education.

There is also the matter of unionization of teachers. In order to protect their standards of living, teachers have increased their union activity enormously in the last 25 years. Even so, they have lost ground economically and professionally. Their working conditions have gotten worse; their buying power has as well. To protect themselves, they have moved much more to a collective

perspective, bidding for uniform conditions, waiving the privileges of entrepeneurs and demanding the security of blue collar workers. Much more of their after-hours activity is devoted to "protecting their turf." Less time is spent grading papers.

Another employment aspect is especially interesting to the author, though much smaller in scope than the above instances. The easy money these days for a technical specialist in education is working on government contracts. Large numbers of what have been called "quango" (quasi-national-government organizations) have been created to do the work of governments which governments cannot or do not want to do for themselves. These organizations evaluate programs, develop administrative routines and materials, provide technical assistance to operating sites, organize conferences, create information clearinghouses and networks, etc. It must be presumed that they use up some funding that would have been used for more direct support of teaching and learning. Also, they usually perceive the nature of education from an administrative viewpoint, stressing performance indicators, uniformity of aim and procedure, and the importance of the central government role in the conduct of education.

Such economic circumstances, and the political ones mentioned next, change the expectations of what schools are, exert subtle and sometimes not so subtle pressure on teachers, and limit the exercise of local control.

Politicalization of Education

As the overall largest consumer of tax funds, the schools could not escape the politicalization of American life in this period. The war in Vietnam, Watergate, terrorism (including assassinations and hijacking) encouraged everyone to worry about what happens when the public trust is held behind closed doors. School doors were no more closed than they had been when the citizenry had sat at desks within, but political sensitivities had been pricked, and the shortcomings of schools increasingly became something more than parent-teacher business, but government and media business. As said before, it was all part of our developing social ethic in those decades.

All the while there was a continuation of the commitment to a "national destiny," to be "number one," to outdo the Communists, to eradicate poverty and disease, to rise to the limits of our potential--collectively, nationalistically, not in the spirit of liberty and personal uniqueness, but in a "love it or leave it" yearning and Vince Lombardi tradition. As long as each child had a part of that destiny, then each child should submit to a common set of standards, minimum competencies, basic tasks, the elements, the building blocks of social responsibility. The tasks had their educational relevancy, to be sure, but the attainment of the tasks was easily misread as educational worthiness.

It probably is not true that teachers are less concerned about the socialization of youngsters in 1980 than they were in 1950. Perhaps school teachers always have said: pay attention to the assignment, complete all the work assigned, do "your own" work, keep busy, do it the way it's done in the book, and so on. That certainly still is the line in classrooms all across America. This socialization aim has not deteriorated, though the success of these

admonitions is often not apparent. But television showed that the work-ethic is not all that important, "heroes" don't go by the book--in fact they flaunt it, etc. Teachers are frustrated, as are parents, in their efforts to constrain and direct student learnings. Some have given up. Most have not.

> In an urban science classroom, we saw a teacher demonstrating a sensitive balance, showing that even pennies weigh different amounts. When the second class gathered 'round, the pennies were missing. The lesson was disrupted while other pennies were found.

The price pedagogy pays is difficult to set, but it is real. The courts require all kinds of children to be attending school together in the same classroom. The teacher scales down his or her goals, substitutes a recitation for a demonstration, prepares the students for a test rather than relating a concept to personal experience.

Parents, distressed, want more from their schools. Legislatures pass restrictive legislation such as the Stull Act and Hart Act in California, hoping that permissive teachers will be driven out, and that tough teachers will be reinforced. Critics demand more evidence that the schools are "producing" something, as if education were a color television set. And educators voice those same concerns, in many places more vigorously than anyone else, partly in self-protection, but partly because they too are unhappy with what the schools have become.

Quality of Education

The schools are part of many problems that reflect an increasingly affluent, indulgent society.

> Several seventeen-year old boys and girls sit in the shade during noon hour. A boy picks up a gum wrapper, wads it, tosses it in the face of a nearby girl. She smiles and shoots it back. Another girl watches, amused--but not entirely. She carries his child.

School people do not know how to deal with the perplexities of our society, not even with the shortcomings of our courses of study. Given the conditions prevailing in their classrooms, they do not know a way to improve the teaching and learning there. Perhaps some other teachers would, but the teachers now employed more or less are the ones who will be there during the 1980s. Most teachers would argue, with some validity, that the schools are pretty good, but they could be much better, if only . . .

Most readers will agree that the conditions in our schools need improvement, that our problems in school are closely linked with the problems of our society, and that local control of the schools has diminished. What many find difficult to accept is that the yielding of local control to corporate control has contributed substantially to the problems. Many think that uniform standards and minimum performance criteria have not yet been tried, and that relief lies in that direction.

They have been tried, and the results are dismal. Educational accountability systems have been initiated in more than half the states and in many of the larger school districts. A few promises are still being voiced as to what difference this will make, and some administrators or technicians are claiming signs of success, but such talk has greatly abated. The realistic expectation for getting worthwhile information for the improvement of teaching and learning is very low.

What happens when a district decides to impose uniform standards and minimum performance requirements? Educators and laymen try to identify some most basic and critical learnings. They agree on a few things, usually so general that no curricular arguments are raised. They develop a small number of test items having face validity for representing the critical learnings. No one supposes that these items stand for an education, or for even some abstract minimum expectation, but only that the test score would correlate positively. If a lot of fuss is made about student performance on the tests, then the teachers emphasize those particular lessons which are most likely to produce good test scores. With enthusiasm or reluctance, the teachers go along with the system, departing sometimes from what they think is the best instruction to satisfy the present demands. It is no surprise to anyone that there is not a great correspondence between what is emphasized in preparing students for the test and what is considered vital understanding for educated human beings. The tests orient to the simplest of skills, even trivial learnings.

After students master skills at one level they are to master skills at the next. Skill testing follows skill testing. Always they are being prepared for something that seems never to come. They emerge from this sort of preparation only on graduation day. They by then have had little (formal) practice using the skills in complex situations--organizing, synthesizing, evaluating their learnings. Those skills not practiced, even when once "mastered," are forgotten. Teachers know that if youngsters are going to think critically, creatively and substantively, they need to have opportunities to think those ways day in and day out, and certainly not just at recess and at home.

There are, of course, some schools in which a present chaos can be reduced by a more mechanical "training" approach. There are many individual students who need a more skill-oriented program of studies. These decisions are best made at the school, the room and the child level. Right now, other options are less available because of the many pressures on school people to conform to a corporate form of school operation.

We probably would be better off with less subordination of the education purposes of schools to economic and political purposes of the country. The schools need more help with their formal mission, to provide educational opportunity. It might help to formalize two "rights": the right of a parent to the kind of teaching he or she wants for his or her child; and the right of a student to a learning situation where other students are ordinarily serious about (at least tolerant of) academic learning. Current priorities would have to change to accommodate those rights, and the most likely way of getting those changes would be to re-establish the standing of local control.

It is a difficult thing, probably, for government people to accept the idea that the most responsible thing to do is to exercise less direct responsibility, to be greatly concerned and supportive without specifying the

improvements to be made. But education today needs just that, the opportunity and the responsibility for local schools, for teachers in the classrooms, for citizens in a neighborhood, to run their own schools.

The argument here is not that national needs are less important than local needs. Some of our nationally recognized social advances in the past thirty years may have justified less consideration of general education. Needs at either level can be wrong. Vietnam (a national commitment) was wrong. Segregated schools (a local commitment) were wrong. Social advance has occurred often because we forced federal protections into local communities. We continue to need the corporate conscience and pocketbook. But right now demands from state, federal and district level are diminishing the contributions of the schools without justifiable educational, economic or political recompense.

To support local initiative will take more than ordinary federal leadership. It might mean that busing to achieve racial proportionality would have to yield to guaranteed access to a school of the parents' choice. It might mean that tenured teachers that parents do not want would have to be guaranteed a corporate assignment (something akin to what we did with soil banks). To restore the curricular integrity of school will probably require creative and costly federal support.

We should be guided by the fact that we have shown that we can educate our youth. It works best when people close at hand make the decisions, without standards set from afar. In the 1980s, as in the 1950s, local control should be a national priority.